

AUDIO

FAQ

Q Why does the internet radio station I am listening to keep cutting out?

A The only real problem with internet radio streaming is that, while the bit rate of a stream is fixed (most often between 40Kbit/s and 128Kbit/s) so its audio quality won't deteriorate, a lack of bandwidth at your end or the server's can result in it cutting out unexpectedly. Unless you are downloading multiple files while listening, your connection won't usually be the problem.

There could be too much demand on the station to which you are listening. Most have a maximum number of simultaneous listeners and won't accept additional connections once this number has been reached. When they begin to approach the upper limit, this can put a strain on the server, resulting in the stream cutting out periodically. Buffering gaps of this sort can also be the result of heavy internet traffic at some point on the route between your PC and the server, which results in slower data transfer speeds.

Kat Orphanides

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APPLE iPod Touch

★★★★★

£269 inc VAT

From <http://store.apple.com/Apples/WebObjects/ukstore.woa>

Apple's latest flagship iPod might not be able to make phone calls, but it's otherwise similar to the iPhone. Integrated WiFi makes it easy to connect to a local wireless network. You get both Apple's Safari web browser and a dedicated YouTube browser, although Safari doesn't support Flash, Java or most media streaming standards.

You can access and download songs from the iTunes Store but none of the free content, including many podcasts, is available. With WiFi enabled, the Touch constantly scans for networks.

A single button wakes the player from sleep mode and returns to previous menus, and the touch-sensitive screen is extremely accurate. An orientation sensor detects whether you're holding it upright or sideways, and adjusts the display accordingly. The onscreen keyboard is fine for simple searching and browsing, and a unique pinch-to-focus feature makes it easy to zoom in and out of webpages.

At its native 640x480 resolution, video is clear and sharp. Colours are accurate and the bright 3.5in screen can be viewed from all angles and in most light conditions with minimal glare. The iPod Touch supports the MPEG4 and H.264 video standards and can play any video that worked on previous iPods. Unfortunately, iTunes does a poor job of converting video files from other formats and it



took hours to convert a full-length film to play on it. Audio quality was excellent at normal settings, though. Although we noticed slight distortion of some low-end frequencies at bass boosted settings, it wasn't a deal breaker. The standard iPod headphones were disappointing, though.

Unlike other iPods, you can use the Touch to play music when it's connected to a PC via USB transferring content. With WiFi enabled, we got a respectable 16 hours and four minutes of audio playback. This increased to 25 hours and 33 minutes when we turned off WiFi. Video playback time was seven hours and 23 minutes.

We did have some quibbles. The 16GB of flash memory seems scant compared to the 160GB iPod Classic, and there is no way to create video playlists or watch videos in sequence. Video format support is poor compared to Archos's 605 WiFi (see 'Also

consider...' on page 35), but that lacks a web browser.

The iPod Touch is one of the sleekest portable media players on the market. Although a more affordable 8GB version is available for £199, it still isn't great value. Fortunately for Apple, the iPod Touch is cool enough to justify the hype and, if you don't mind the meagre storage, it's a great choice.

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SUMMARY

- ✓ High-quality screen
- ✓ Great touch-screen control system
- ✗ Only 16GB of storage

PORTABLE MEDIA/MP3 PLAYER 16GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless and AIFF audio, JPEG image, H.264 and MPEG4 video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed and 802.11b/g wireless interfaces
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk

Also consider...

SANDISK Sansa e280

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT

From www.play.com



BEST BUY This classy 8GB MP3 player is great value. It has an impressive battery life of 18 hours and 17 minutes. Its control wheel and menu system were easy to use and the 1.8in colour screen was free from graininess. Audio quality was consistently good. We were impressed by the speed and stability of its video-conversion software. The player is expanded via a microSD card slot.

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE SDMX4-8192-A70
DETAILS www.sandisk.com
✓ Good audio quality and battery life
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007

ALBA PRDAB210MP3

★★★★★

£47 inc VAT

From www.laskys.com



BEST BUY Alba's affordable 1GB MP3 player can be powered for over 25 hours by a single AA battery. It incorporates a digital DAB radio and its sound is loud, clear and distinct. Its menu system is surprisingly sophisticated for such a simple device. Its three-line LCD screen can display tracks in a number of ways, including by artist and the date they were transferred to the player.

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, DAB radio, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE PRDAB210MP3
DETAILS www.laskys.com
✓ Long battery life; DAB radio
✗ Poor headphones
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk



BEST BUY These speakers sound clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50, and quite a few that are more expensive. If you want a good set for music or games, there are no better speakers available at this price.

STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1, 32W power, 3.5mm stereo cable inputs
PART CODE 970123-1120
DETAILS www.logitech.com
✓ Excellent sound quality ✗ Cabling is awkward
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

AUZENTECH

Auzen X-Fi Prelude 7.1

★★★★★

£119 inc VAT

From www.scan.co.uk

On-board sound processors are so good these days that most people don't bother adding a separate sound card to their PC. However, certain tasks – such as gaming, music production and home entertainment – can benefit from one.

This sound card uses Creative's X-Fi audio processor. Auzentech aims to improve on Creative's own cards by creating a unique circuit board to house the X-Fi chipset. Some users will certainly appreciate the upgradable operational amplifier chip, but most users should be satisfied with the card's default configuration.

The Prelude is equipped to output sound to 2.1, 5.1, and 7.1 speaker configurations. You can also use a normal pair of stereo headphones or speakers, and the driver's gaming mode does a fantastic job of creating the impression of realistic 3D sound through a pair of headphones.

As well as analogue line and microphone inputs, there are S/PDIF in and out ports. These enable you to connect high-quality digital recording equipment and DVD players with either optical or coaxial cables. With Smart Volume Management and Dolby



surround-sound compatibility, the card is well suited to PC-based home cinema systems.

We were impressed by the card's clean, accurate audio recording quality. The interpretation of General MIDI left a little to be desired and there's no MIDI input, although MIDI output can be positioned in 3D space. However,

the card put in a great performance when it came to sampling analogue audio input.

The Auzen X-Fi Prelude 7.1 costs less than the top model in Creative's own Sound Blaster X-Fi range. Auzentech has created a quality product that can make a great performance of just about anything that is put through it.

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SUMMARY

- ✓ Immersive 3D audio
- ✓ Excellent sample quality
- ✗ Poor MIDI synthesis

SOUND CARD Creative X-Fi chipset, mic in, line in, front out, rear out, centre/woofer out, back surround out, S/PDIF in, S/PDIF out, 64MB on-board memory. Requires Microsoft Windows XP/Vista, 1GHz processor, 256MB RAM
DETAILS www.auzentech.com

CHOOSING A...
Speaker System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

SURROUND FORMAT: Stereo

RMS POWER: 5W

INPUTS: 1x analogue

BUILT-IN DECODING: None

Recommended minimum in grey

1 PC speaker systems, which consist of speakers and an amplifier to power them, can cost anything from £5 to £300. The cheapest sets, with the specifications shown in grey above, will be fine for those who simply want to play Windows alert noises on a PC they use solely for work.

2 Those who use their PC for any kind of entertainment should go for a better system. The first thing to look for is a subwoofer, which handles bass frequencies, while the satellites output mid- and high-frequency sounds.

Other than this, the best way to establish the quality of a system is to consult our reviews. Specifications don't tell you much, and the price of a system often bears little relation to its actual performance.

3 Games and DVDs will benefit greatly from a surround-sound system. The standard surround configuration is 5.1, which consists of five satellite speakers and one subwoofer, but those who must have the latest technologies should consider 6.1 or 7.1 speakers, plus a compatible sound card that is capable of supporting the extended Dolby Digital EX format.

4 The power rating can give you a rough idea of how loud the speakers will go. Ignore PMPO or Peak Power ratings, which can be as much as 40 times the RMS figure.

A 50W RMS system should provide ample volume for a desktop PC, but for a home cinema you should look for 100W RMS or more.

5 Stereo speakers need only a single analogue stereo input, while a 5.1 system needs three. Surround-sound systems that incorporate Dolby Digital decoders must be fed through an S/PDIF digital input, which comes in (non-compatible) coaxial and optical versions. However, as Dolby Digital decoding can be handled in software, surround speakers with analogue inputs are far more cost-effective.

FREECOM
MusicPal

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.pcworld.co.uk

EXCLUSIVE



Freecom's MusicPal gives you access to thousands of free radio stations streamed over the internet using vTuner and Shoutcast. You can add extra stations using a web interface, although the device currently supports streams only in MP3 and Wav formats, not Real Audio. You can also listen to music from a computer on your local network using Windows Media Connect Server or cross-platform software such as VLC or TwonkyMedia.

The MusicPal is mains powered and looks like a normal radio, with two button dials to adjust the volume and navigate the menu system. Two additional buttons bring up the menu and your favourites list, which are displayed on a 3in mono LCD screen. The device has headphone and twin RCA sockets, so you can connect it to more powerful external speaker systems. Although the MusicPal has only a mono speaker, its sound quality is excellent, with great clarity and volume.



You can configure the radio using only its menu system, but entering your wireless networking password with the button dial can be a tedious process. Fortunately, a wired Ethernet port lets you configure your wireless settings via the excellent web interface. We couldn't connect the

SUMMARY

- ✓ Affordable
- ✓ Easy to use and feature-packed
- ✗ Streams MP3 and Wav only

WIRELESS INTERNET RADIO Supports MP3 and Wav streams, 802.11b/g and 10/100 Ethernet interfaces, WPA and WPA2 encryption, stereo headphone & twin RCA output
PART CODE 29309
DETAILS www.freecom.com

device to wireless networks secured with a 26-character WEP key, but it worked perfectly with WPA and WPA2 password systems.

The MusicPal is great value and has more features than other, more expensive, internet radios. Its only real limitation is the small number of audio formats it can handle.

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